



Turning GOP Words Into Positive Action

By Kenneth J. Cooper

THE STATIC you hear interrupting those sweet-sounding overtures from House Republican leaders to Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) members is the clashing of their respective constituents' attitudes about government.

When House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his conservative crusaders look at the federal bureaucracy, they see a trillion-dollar wasteland that soaks their constituents for taxes. Republicans want to trim or transfer many federal programs to state governments, which they consider closer to "the people" and thus more trustworthy than Washington bureaucrats.

After the raised and dashed expectations of the War on Poverty and Model Cities programs, few African-Americans harbor naive notions that the federal government will set "the people" free.

But for historical reasons they generally do view Washington more favorably than the angry White voters who elected the new Republican majority to Congress. The federal government provided the first protection against assorted, state-sanctioned forms of racial discrimination and, before that, employment away from the unchecked bias of private companies.

Compare attitudes toward the post office, for instance. To conservative Republicans, the U.S. Postal Service symbolizes government waste and inefficiency. To Blacks, the post office has represented

opportunity and upward mobility: families supported, homes bought, children sent to college.

Gingrich has praised Democrats for ending legal segregation in the South and suggests they command the loyalty of Black voters because "it was the liberal wing of the Democratic Party that ended segregation."

What Gingrich did not say was that liberal Republicans, who scarcely exist anymore, also supported civil rights. Nor did he spell out what the Republican Party might propose to do about enduring racial inequalities. Instead, Gingrich has tried to separate himself from the racism of the last conservative White Southerner to rise in national politics, former presidential candidate George Wallace, of Alabama.

As the more pro-business party, Republicans could play a natural role in African-American advancement by helping to abolish the economic bondage of being unemployed and undercapitalized. Gingrich once ruminated about creating 11,000 Black millionaires, but he did not say how.

Freshman Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.) has backed a capital gains tax cut as a boon to all businesses. The Black Republican looks no farther than his own family, for an example, citing taxes on the modest profits his father, J.C. Watts Sr., makes raising and selling calves.

Gingrich and Watts have not answered a basic question: What can Republicans do to narrow economic inequalities when the party opposes every manner of race-conscious policy? If, as Watts asserts, a capital gains cut benefits Black and White businesses in the same way, then by definition, no progress toward equality will result.

Hope might be found in Gingrich's professed willingness to learn. He has proposed an exchange program that would take him to Baltimore for a few days with former CBC chairman Kweisi Mfume (D-Md.), and Mfume to Gingrich's suburban Atlanta district.

One might wonder why he has not bothered to make the rounds with home-state Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), to the Atlanta University Center, nearby public housing and Ebenezer Baptist Church.

But an optimist merely might suggest that Gingrich, a former history professor who likes to recommend books, do some reading on the urban wasteland. *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952), *The Street* by Ann Petry (1946) and *Native Son* (1944) and *Eight Men* (1961) by Richard Wright, for instance, explore the social, psychological and economic conditions of Blacks. And those classics were written long before the Great Society, whose programs Gingrich aims to dismantle for allegedly ruining the poor. ■

What can Republicans do to narrow economic inequality?